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new

Residential Design Guidelines

For New Buildings
In Older Neighborhoods

This brochure was prepared by
the Urban Design staff of the
Department of City Planning.
Commentary from a large number of
local citizens and groups assisted
the presentation of these ideas.
Members of the Landmarks Preservation
Advisory Board and other department
staff members also contributed advice.

Department of City Planning
100 Larkin Street
San Francisco, California 94102

1979

Building in Neighborhoods

San Francisco has many streets and areas with unique architectural characteristics. The qualities that set these areas apart are fragile and easily damaged by thoughtless design. A single inappropriate building can have a remarkably disruptive effect on a group or even an entire block of buildings. The Department of City Planning has prepared this booklet to help avoid the kind of design errors that may adversely affect a neighborhood. It sets out some basic design rules for achieving compatible new buildings and presents guidelines for applying them to typical situations found throughout San Francisco.

The guidelines in this booklet have been prepared for use by citizen groups, builders and architects. Neighborhood organizations will find it useful in reviewing proposed new construction in their area and securing desired changes. Builders and architects will find the guidelines valuable as a checklist of factors to consider in preparing designs that will avoid the delays and expense of local confrontation. They will also be used by the Landmarks Board and Department of City Planning when conducting design review.

DISCOVERNING DESIGN RULES FOR COMPATIBILITY

A building that is a 'good neighbor' supports rather than competes with the established visual character of a block. It contributes to an overall design unity and conveys a strong sense of belonging in its setting. A 'good neighbor' means that a building is harmonious with the structures around it; if there is contrast it is positive in nature, with no disruptive excesses. On dull, bland streets a 'good neighbor' will add visual interest; and where there is already a strong visual character it will not indulge in devisive competition for attention. The degree of design restraint or the conditions require to achieve harmony vary with the situation.

Each cluster of like-minded buildings has its own set of rules for achieving design accord. Some situations demand rigid narrowly defined design objectives, others may permit considerable latitude or variation. The rules are implicit in the existing pattern. Build with these rules and the new structure will be compatible, ignore them and it will be an intrusion.

Which features determine the appropriate design rules for an area? The easiest situation to observe is one in which these rules are violated. In almost every part of the City there are buildings that just do not "work" with their neighbors, and are obtrusive in their surroundings. It does not require an architect to note that a single-story ranch style dental clinic built of concrete block and unpainted plywood and set in the midst of tall ornate Queen Anne styled homes differs radically from its neighbors in the following ways:

1. Even from a distance a casual observer would note that the clinic building is much lower than its neighbors and instead of a peaked roof and conical towers its silhouette is plain and flat.

2. Being low and proportionately very wide, the clinic clearly differs from the rhythm of narrow closely spaced buildings.

3. Built right up to the sidewalk the clinic does not share the setback that distinguishes the homes.

4. The low wide windows of the clinic are diametrically at odds with the tall narrow windows in the Queen Anne townhouses.

5. The facade of the clinic is flat compared to the townhouses with their bay windows, cylindrical towers, recesses and projections.

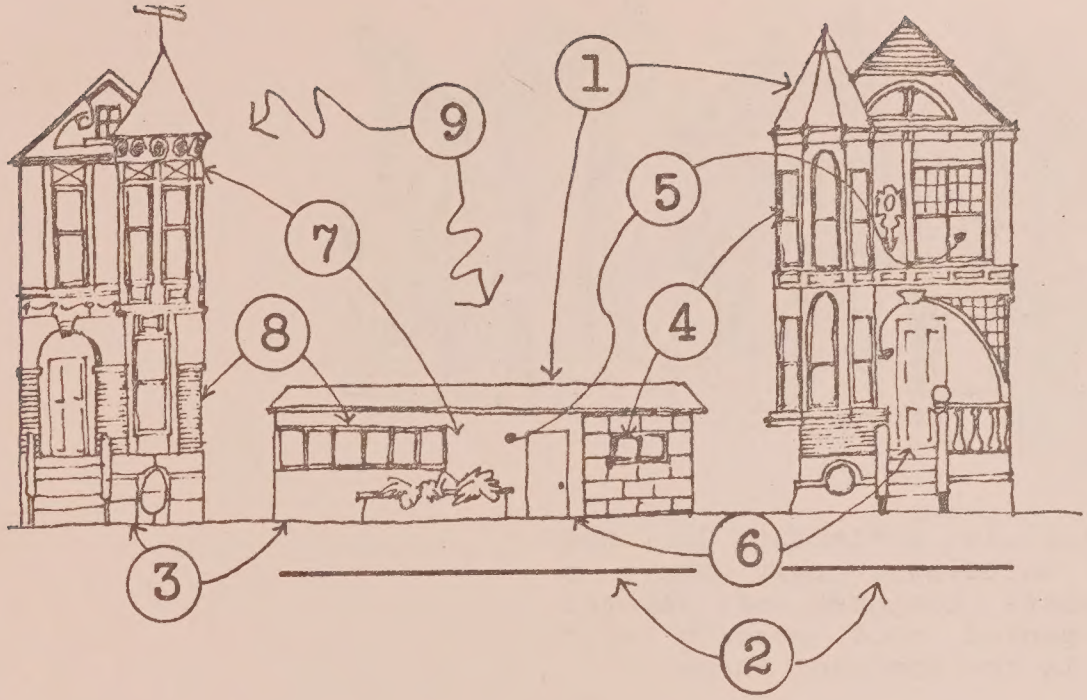
6. The clinic doorway, instead of being reached by a flight of stairs and marked by a generous recessed entry, opens directly to the street.

7. The unpainted redwood, plywood and concrete block clinic posseses neither a common surface finish or scale of material comparable to the well painted, finely detailed woodwork characterizing the Queen Annes.

8. The ornamentation, projection and decorative surface of the Queen Anne homes create rich shadow patterns in contrast to the flat plywood panels of the clinic.

9. Finally, there is the radical difference between the impressions conveyed by the design styles. On the one hand, we have the Queen Annes with their castle-like towers, elegant proportions, and rich ornamentation evocative of Old World building styles; on the other hand, in total discord, we find the ranch style clinic suggestive of simple frontier building with mild overtones of modernity.

All of these differences reinforce each other. The net result is a building that lacks unity with its setting. Instead we have a building that can only divide a neighborhood visually instead of reinforcing a sense of wholeness.



The nine ways the example differs from its neighbors are keys to implicit design rules that govern compatibility. The basic factors used to determine Rules for a particular neighborhood setting are:

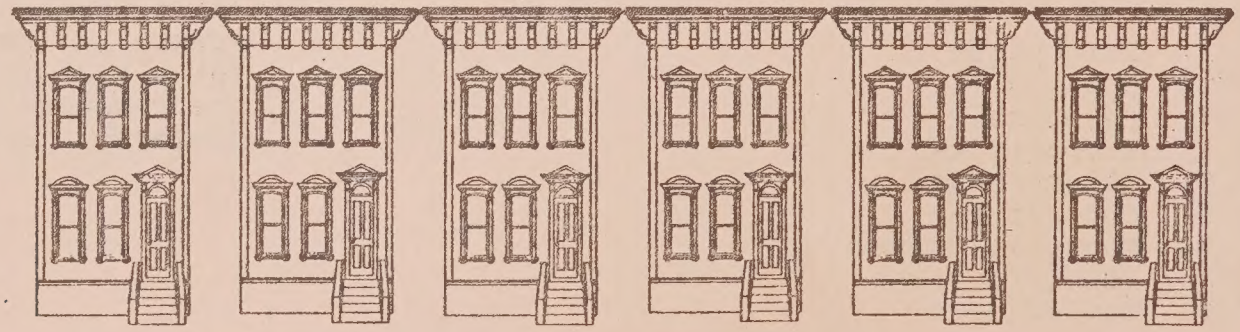
1. Silhouette
2. Spacing
3. Setbacks
4. Proportions
5. Volume/Mass
6. Entryways
7. Material/Surface
8. Shadow/Texture
9. Style/Image

To demonstrate how to discover design rules with this checklist, let us apply them to four situations typical of San Francisco, (a) a group of similar Queen Anne buildings; (b) a row of identical flat front Italianate houses; (c) a series of alternatingly styled Spanish, French and American Colonial row houses; and (d) a mixture of styles. The differences that are revealed will provide the key to the design concerns appropriate to each situation.

Although each building is different in this group of Queen Anne buildings, they share a complex active silhouette composed of several elements. The sharp gabled roof merging with angular tower or bay is the dominant theme.

silhouette

The mechanically rhythmic repetition of a precise form is the powerful unifying force in this row of flat front Italianate buildings. When surrounded by varied roof forms, groups like this stand out dramatically. A small deviation in profile on one of these buildings would be damaging.



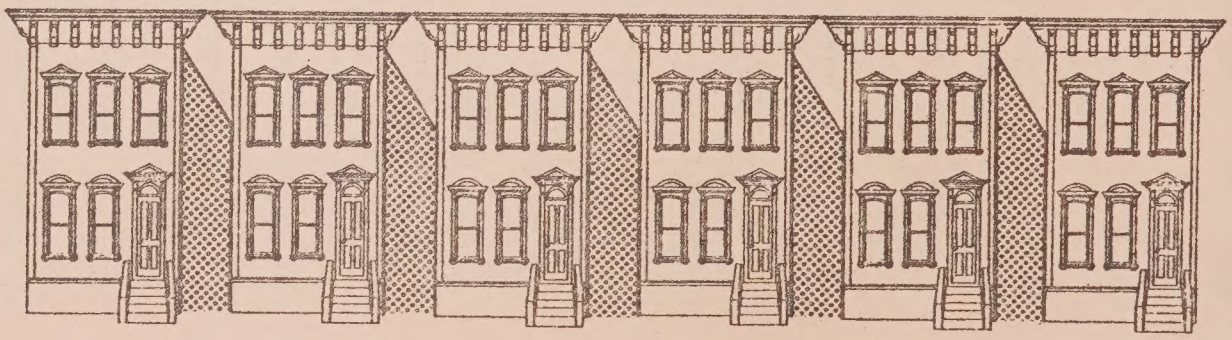
Several distinctive but mildly expressed styles are alternated in this group. The different roof forms share a counterpoint between strong horizontal lines and stolid verticals. The spacing of the vertical element sets up a quiet, fairly regular rhythm. Retention of the silhouette is very important to group unity.

Since buildings in this group share no common pattern, outline or shape among their individual profiles, replacement of one form by another would make little difference in the whole.

The spaces separating facades (notchbacks) set this group apart from other rowhouses. The gap underscores the separate nature of each unit and sets up a regular rhythm softened by the variations of forms framing the notchback.

spacing

The identical spaces between building facades (notchbacks) creates a bold formal effect setting the group apart. A single deviation would weaken the formal strength of the composition.



This group has no spacing between facades. It relies on stylistic differences and articulation of form to impart individuality.

This group has no spacing between facades. Ambiguity, tension, stylistic differences and absolute height create dissimilarities which set each building apart.

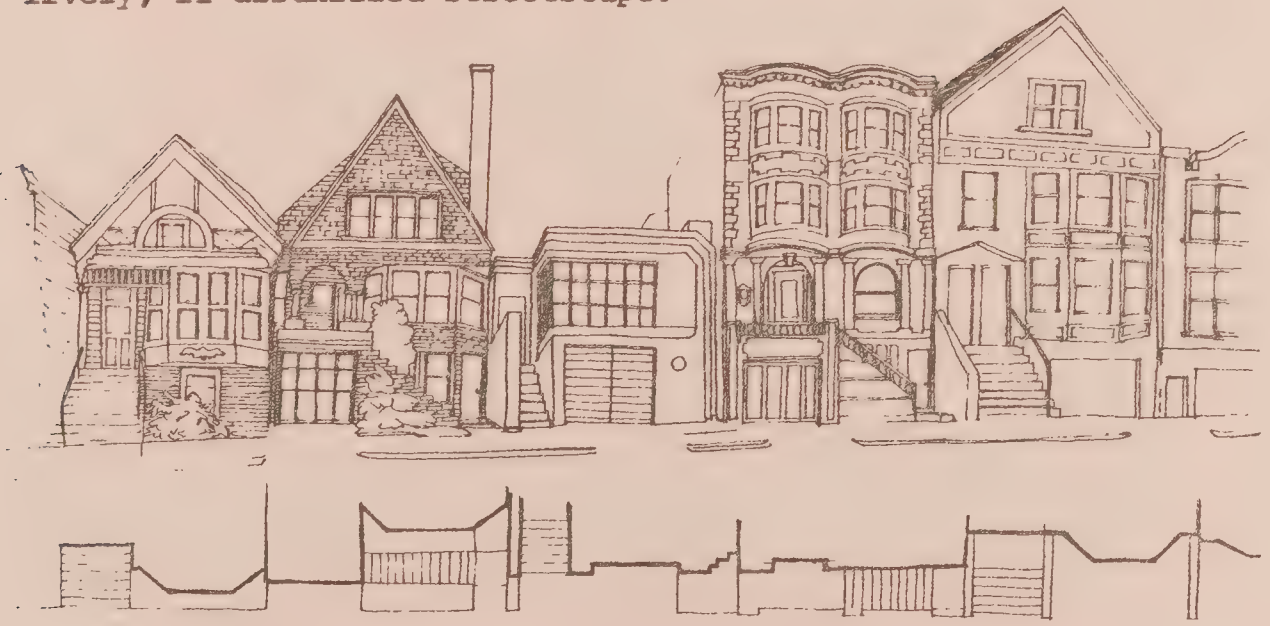
Each building is set back from property line to a similar degree and each facade has portions that are recessed further (partial setback). A building that did not share these characteristics would be disruptive visually.

Identical setbacks and flat facades are essential to this group's identity. Even a small change in setback could have an adverse effect.

setbacks

Uniform setback rhythmically punctuated by projecting towers and bays tie this mixture of styles together.

Random variations in setbacks contribute to a lively, if disunified streetscape.



A majority of windows and doors share similar vertical proportions. The division of the facade into vertical elements tied together by horizontal bands is the basic compositional device common to every one of these buildings.

proportions

Here all windows and doors are vertically proportioned, with verticality emphasized by ornamental pediments. The verticality of the facades is restrained only by the strong horizontal cornice.

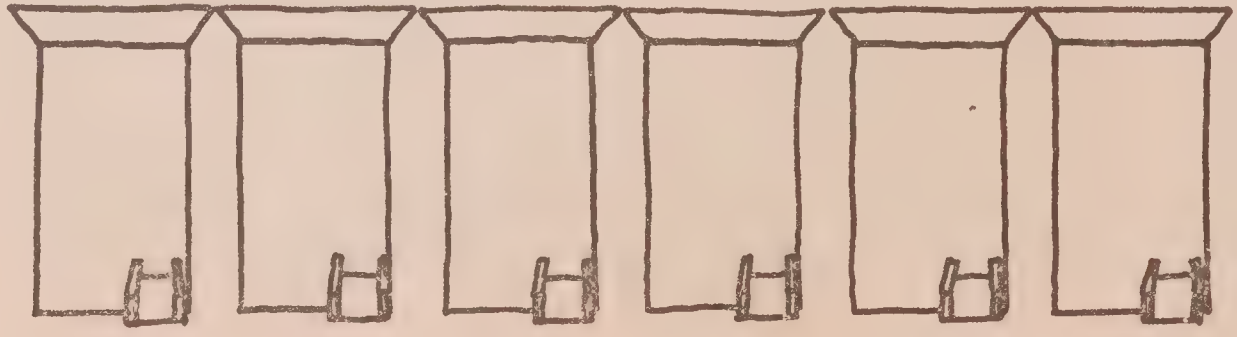
Vertical window openings are grouped in a horizontally-proportioned pattern. Facades are generally composed of a basic horizontal form punctuated by mild vertical elements.

Moderne styled building is strongly horizontal and contrasts to the static unresolved mix of horizontal and vertical in adjacent buildings.

This row of Queen Anne houses features complex building forms: cylindrical towers merge with or into triangular roof elements, bays project outward, and recessed areas are carved out of other parts of the facade. The effect of all this manipulation of the building envelop together with the generous application of decoration is to create a row with a remarkable sense of volume and mass. Although each building is different, together they share an equivalent sense of volume and mass.

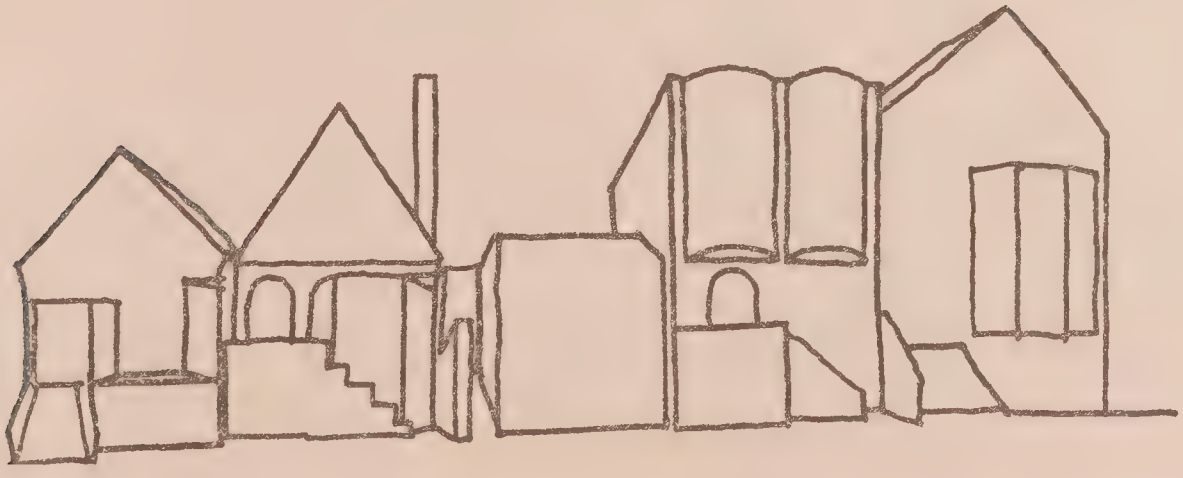
volume/mass

These facades convey little sense of mass or volume. The emphasis is upon a sharply defined flat facade; the only depth arises from the bold ornamentation of cornice, window and door.



Volume is expressed through clearly defined towers, balconies and bays. Deeply recessed doors and windows suggesting thick masonry walls are used to create an impression of mass.

These buildings vary considerably in apparent mass and volume. Articulation of forms is varied and the effect is casual.



A pattern of raised, large, off-center entrances adds richness and rhythm to overall streetscape unity.

entryways

The absolute regularity of the left-of-center placement of entryways increases the formal value of this group while introducing an assymetrical note to each individual design.

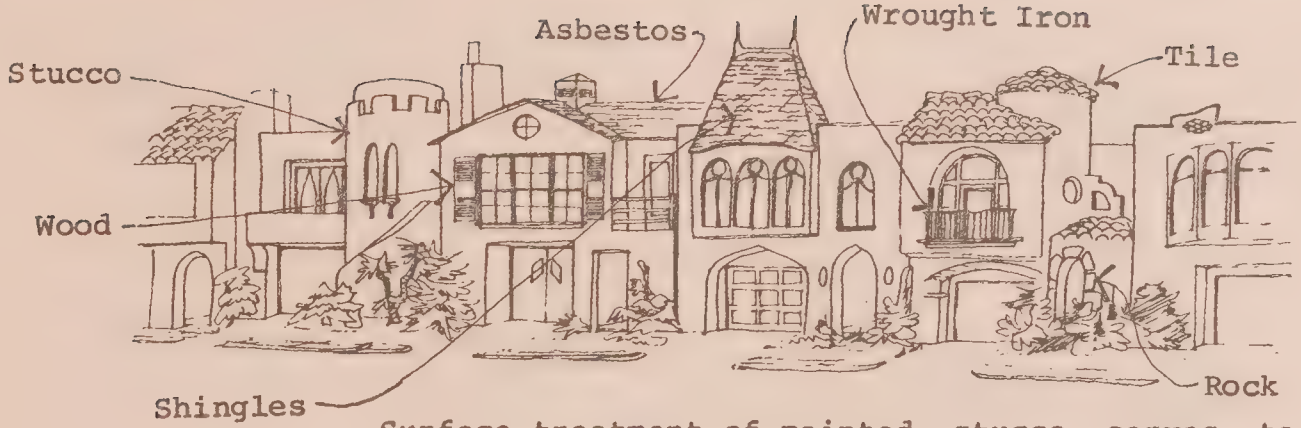
The importance of regular assymetrical pedestrian entryways is enhanced by the equal power of garage door placement. Repetition creates the careful of rhythm the overall design.

No clear rhythm is established by these varied and assymetrical entrances and garage doors. The result is diverse, lively.

The building surface, where it shows between the exuberant molding and trim, is usually narrow wood siding with flush or lapped joints. Occasionally small areas may be filled with decorative shingle or stucco. All except the door is heavily painted.

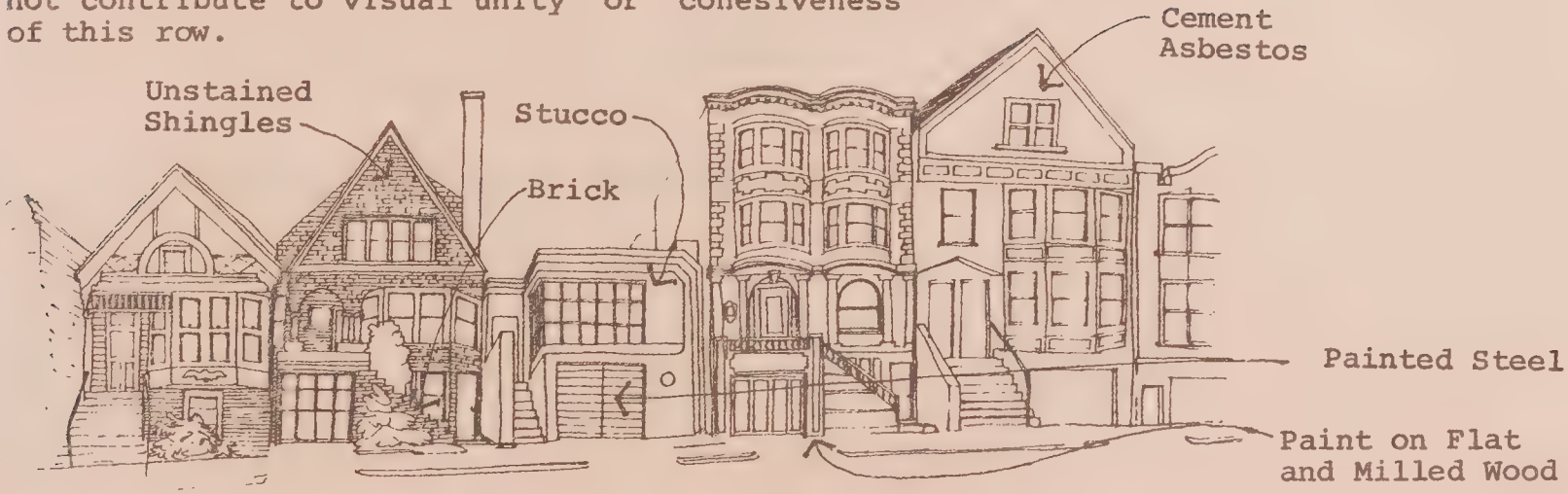
surface/material

Flush jointed wood siding thickly painted forms the building front and offers maximum contrast with the heavy decoration around the windows and entryway.



Surface treatment of painted stucco serves to visually unite this group. Touches of differing materials are used on the roofs to distinguish the mild stylistic themes.

No single material dominates in this mixture. The random use of materials and finishes does not contribute to visual unity or cohesiveness of this row.



These buildings posses a complex pattern of texture and shadows both bold and delicate. A building that did not share these characteristics would have difficulty achieving a comfortable harmony on this block.

shadow/texture

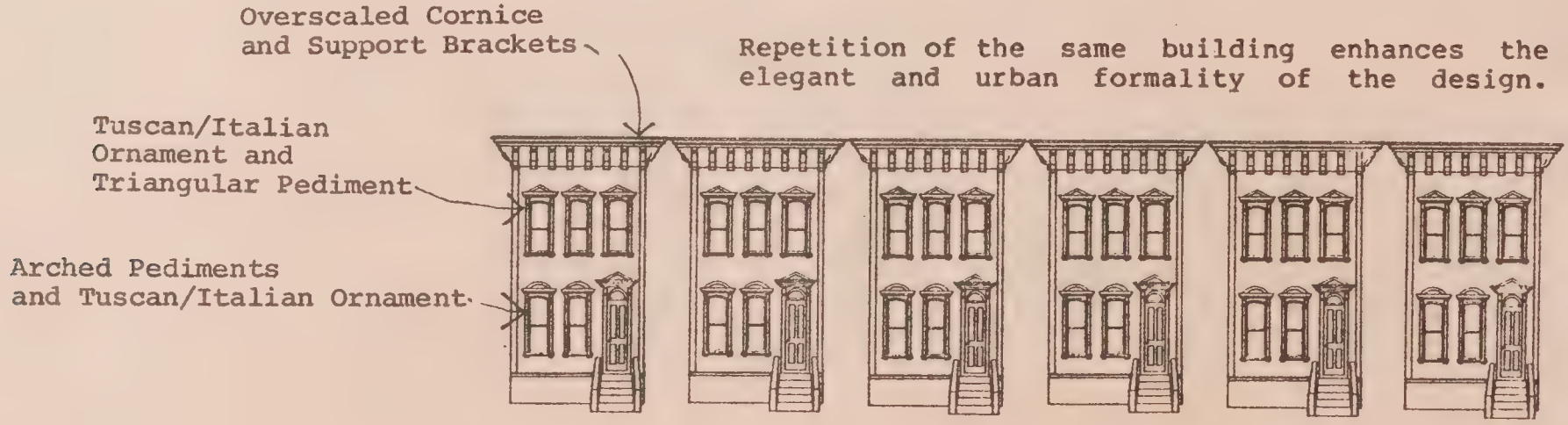
Bold richly carved framing around windows and doors which contrasts with the smooth flat front distinguishes these Italianates. In this instance, precise repetition is important.

Shadows are simple and large scale against the lightly textured stucco. Small areas of tile or shingle roofing provide accents of contrasting texture.

This row of buildings differ markedly from each other in the amount and nature of shadow and texture. Additions to this block would have the greatest design latitude.

This row consists of whimsical variations of the same style. The picturesque towers and gabled roofs are suggestive of castle towers and other Old World architecture.

style & image



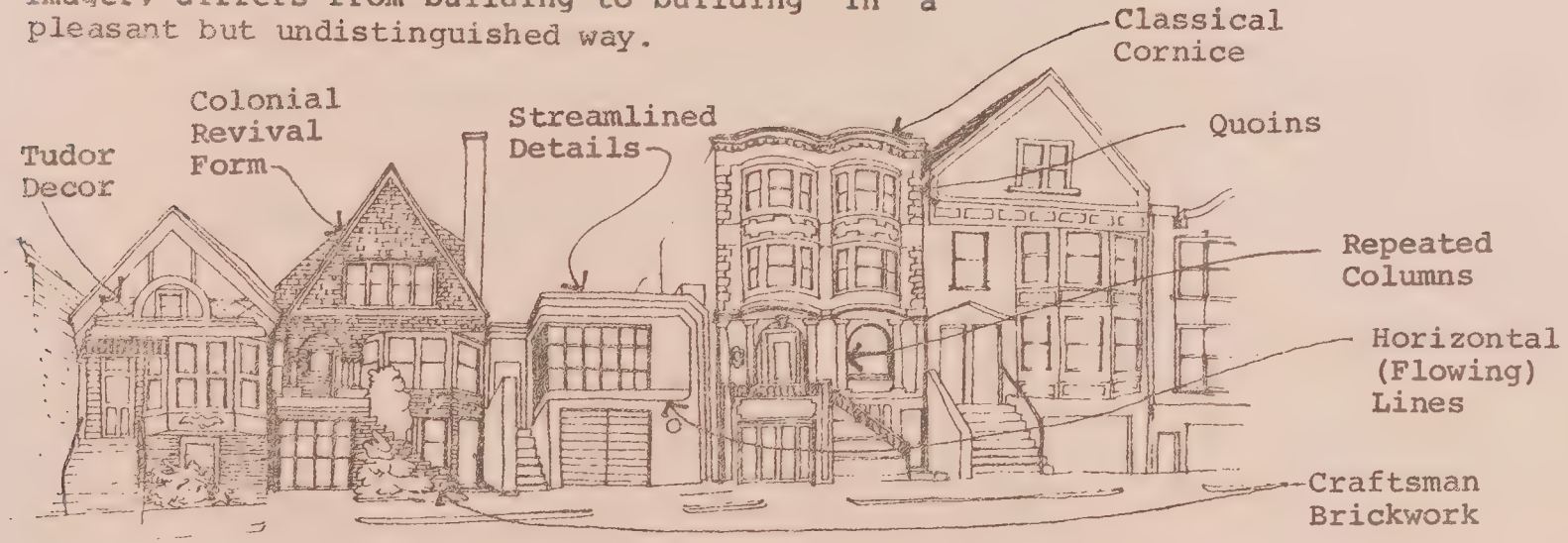
A studied informality is sought in these designs. The imagery suggests the heavy masonry construction of historic styles.

French Window Mullions

Jacobethan Arches

Spanish Colonial Revival

Imagery differs from building to building in a pleasant but undistinguished way.



COMPARISON OF THE CHECKLIST FINDINGS

		Queen Ann	Flat Front Italianate
(1)	Height/ Silhouette	Varied complex roof forms with hip roof central element, similar height	Uniform height and silhouette
(2)	Side spacing	Minor variations of side notchbacks	Uniform side notchbacks
(3)	Setback	Modest setback variations with projecting bays and porticos	Uniform setback
(4)	Proportion	Vertical emphasis to proportions of windows, bays, towers, and facade composition	Vertical windows, doors, and facade proportion
(5)	Volume/Mass	Complex and varied compositions of recessed and projecting elements	Flat front accented by bold decoration around windows, doors, and on cornice
(6)	Entryways	Generous recessed or covered entryways reached by stairs	Narrow entry reached by short stairs
(7)	Surface/ Finish	Flush jointed or lapped narrow wood siding, painted	Flush jointed wood, painted
(8)	Shadow/ Texture	Complex shadow patterns from molding, decorative surface, projections, etc.	Shadows around windows, door, and cornice only
(9)	Style/ Image	Picturesque, whimsical, assymetrical	Formal, repetitive

Colonial Revival	Mixed
Counterpoint between strong horizontal and vertical elements	Varied height and silhouette
No side spacing	No side spacing
Uniform setback punctuated by projecting towers and bays	Varied setbacks
Vertical windows grouped in horizontal openings, overall horizontal emphasis punctuated by mild vertical elements	Mixture of vertical, horizontal and balanced composition
Deep reveals suggesting thick walls, bold solid projecting forms	Varied sense of volume and mass
Recessed group level entry	Variety of entryways and stair configurations
Stucco, painted accented by tile of shingle roofs	Stucco, unpainted shingle, painted wood, abestos shingle
Lightly textured stucco, few but deeply shadowed areas	Varying degree of shadow and texture
Informal image, suggestive of masonry construction and older colonial styles	Mixture of styles and image

Applying the ckecklist criteria produces rules for compatibility that are as distinctive as the four examples. The Queen Anne group demonstrates complexity in almost every factor as opposed to the severe formality of the Flat Front Italianates. The Colonial Revival row is somewhere between the Queen Annes and the Italianates with a clearly expressed organization underlying an apparent casualness. The Mixed Style group makes the fewest demands for achieving compatibility.

In actual practice many other considerations must be taken into account. A group of Queen Annes may include other buildings that do not fit in with their general character. In such a case it would have to be determined if new buildings should seek a transitional design or be guided solely by the characteristics of the Queen Annes.

Rows of identical buildings frequently are a special situation where the rules for building within a row may differ significantly from the rules for building adjacent to a row. Where the building is within and thus an integral part of the row, nothing short of precise duplication of its neighbors may be required. Because a row of identical buildings can be such a strong self-contained visual entity, adjacent structures may depart from the rules; in fact, some contrast in this situation could help set off the row advantageously. This would be true for the Flat Front Italianate example. A row of low key buildings within an area characterized by a particularly strong image would be another problem. In short, design rules for compatibility must be applied with a good measure of common sense and design sensitivity.

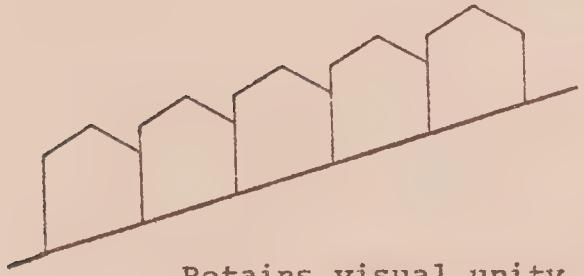
Design rules derived from the nine-point checklist will not automatically produce a good design; for that a good designer is needed. They will prevent the worst kinds of aesthetic disasters. A rigid application of our checklist rules is not always necessary; an exception sometimes can be made for one or two factors provided the others are carefully followed. Again design sensitivity in applying the rules is required.

To aid in the development of design rules a series of illustrated Design Guidelines for Fitting New Residential Buildings into Established Neighborhoods has been prepared. These Guidelines were derived from the checklist and situations in residential districts. Together the design checklist and the guidelines provide a resource for the preparation of more site specific guidelines.

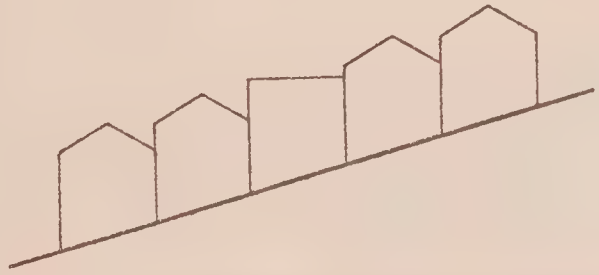
GUIDELINES FOR DESIGN COMPATIBILITY

The following design guidelines primarily apply to row buildings where sideyards are extremely narrow or nonexistent. They may be applied to all parts of the city, but are particularly valuable in areas with concentrations of architecturally noteworthy buildings.

1. A building with a roof form or profile similar to surrounding buildings strengthens the visual unity of the group and contributes to a street visual harmony.

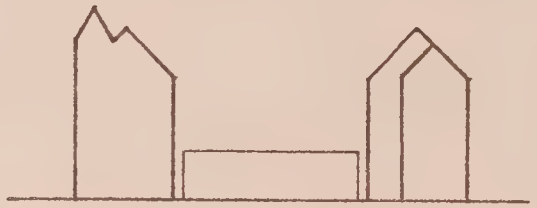


Retains visual unity of the group

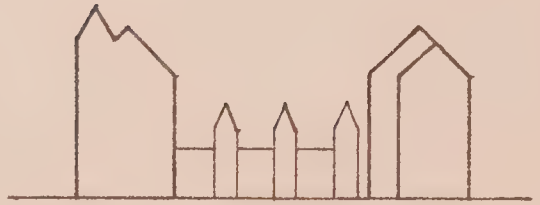


Detracts from established order thereby breaking up its unity

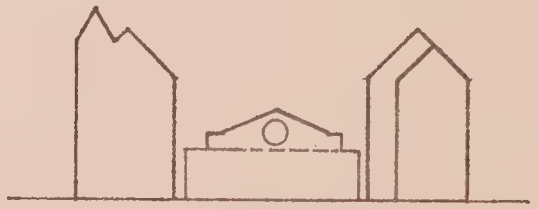
2. A building that does not share either a similar height or profile with adjoining structures is particularly disruptive to a neighborhood street.



Incorporating decorative features of adjacent buildings and making it appear a part of a contiguous building can mitigate the disruptive effect.



A false front or parapet can be used to partially disguise the height and to give a profile harmonious with nearby buildings.



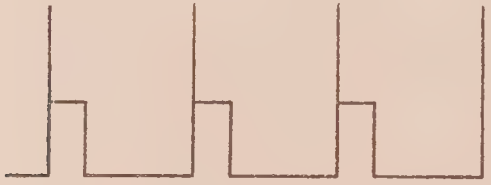
3. Building facades range from the very flat with no expression of interior volumes to the highly articulated. Any new facade should support and enhance a block's design unity and sense of character.

New building does not fit in.

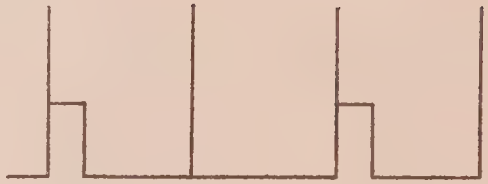
New building works with the rest of the block.

4. Features such as side notches between facades, partial facade setbacks, entry porches, bay windows and other small scale geometric forms when repeated in a row of buildings set up strong visual rhythms. New buildings that incorporate these rhythmic elements preserve block unity and fit in harmoniously.

A. Side Notch Backs

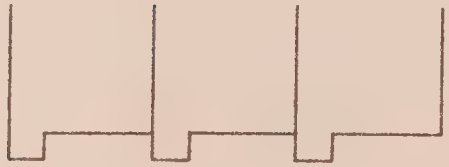


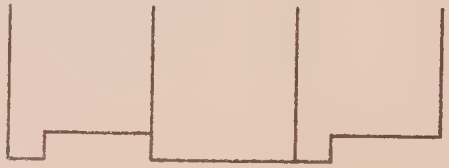
Harmonious



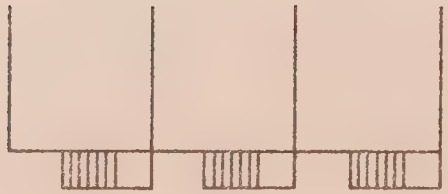
Disruptive

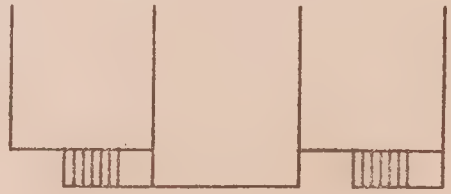
B. Partial Facade Setback



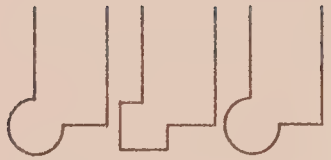


C. Entry porches, stairs, etc

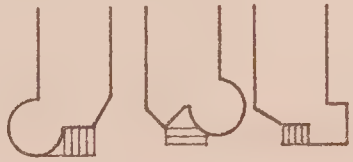




D. Bays and Small Scale Geometric Forms



Combinations of more than one of these repetitive features is quite common in many areas of the city. They work together to produce strong space defining facades and some of the visually richest streets in the city. Where these combinations occur, reflecting the block rhythms in any new development is particularly important.



Queen Ann designs typically combine all elements described above.

New building maintains important rhythms.

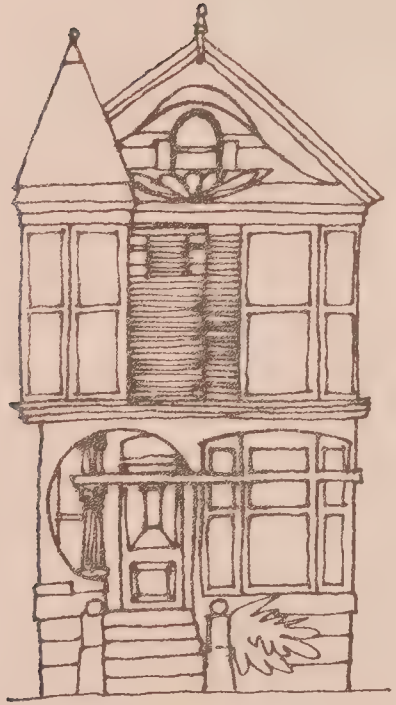
Visual unity of streetscape is destroyed by building that ignores organizing rhythm elements.

5. Facade decoration affects the impression of massiveness as well as the overall pattern on light and shade. If a new building is to fit in harmonously with an established row it must present a facade with a similar sense of mass and play of light and shadow.

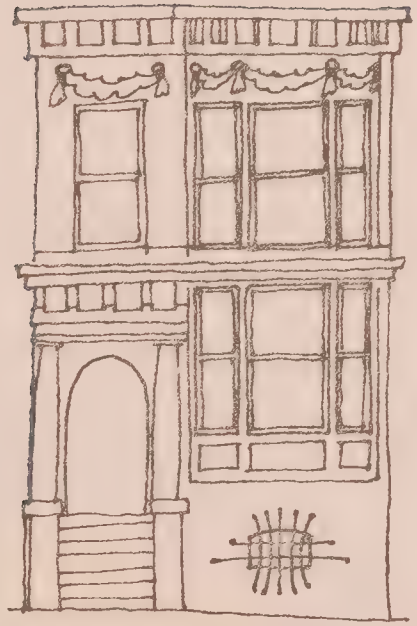
Heavy, large scale ornamentation can produce a powerful sense of mass even on a flat facade.

Lack of decorative features or use of fine scale decoration tends to create a facade with little sense of mass.

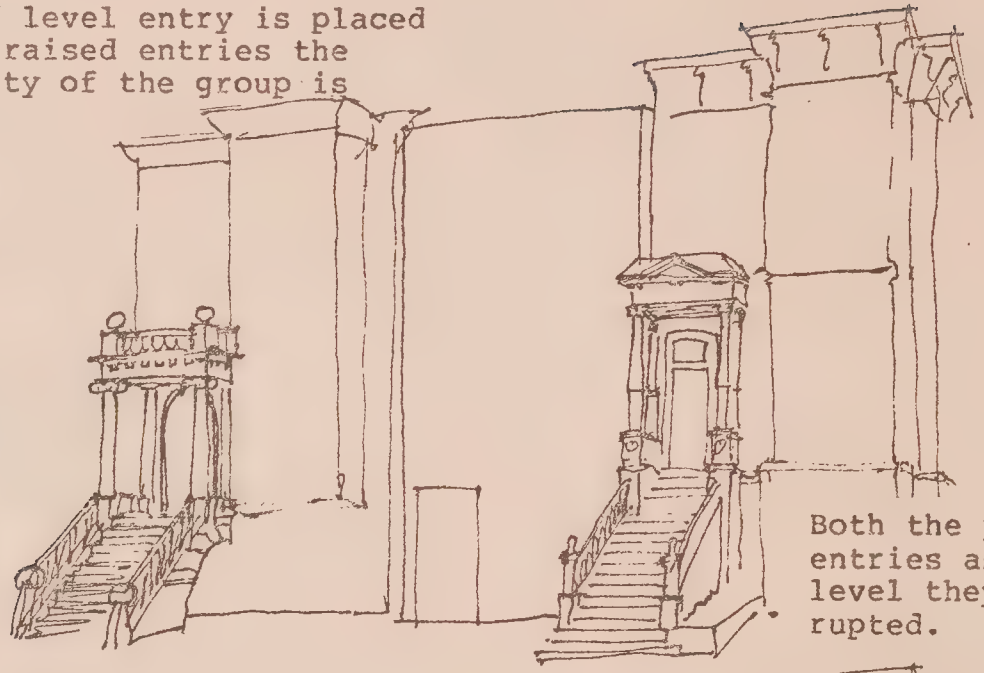
6. Decorative elements boldly applied can be substituted for an articulated facade to create an equivalent sense of weight and mass.



The relatively flat facade of an Edwardian style often relates harmoniously with highly articulated Queen Ann buildings.



7. Entry stairways are extremely important design elements in many areas. When a new building having ground level entry is placed within a cluster with raised entries the visual unity and quality of the group is damaged.



Both the pattern of stairs and entries as well as the podium level they define is interrupted.

The pattern can be maintained by enlarging the form of the entryway to include the second floor window above, creating a counterpart to the raised entries.

8. Entryways emphasized by porticos, decorative treatment, size, etc., become major form elements in street views, contributing to visual richness. A building with a minimal entry detracts from the continuity of areas with more expressive entryways and does not fit in harmonously.

The small entry of new building appears undersized and inadequate compared to gracious and inviting entrances of neighbors.

Expanding the apparent scale the entry by bold framing harmonizes building with the row.

9. Window proportions affect how well a building will relate to surrounding buildings.

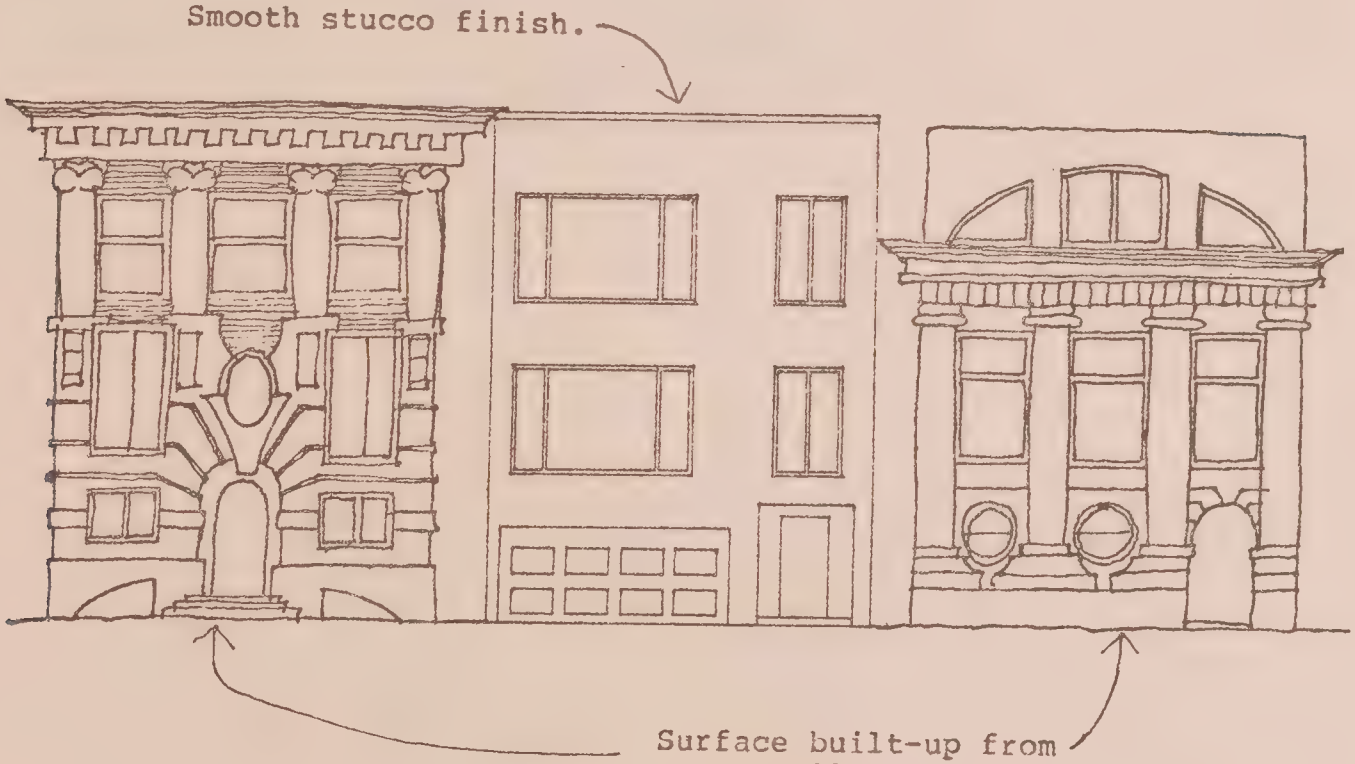
Buildings with horizontally shaped windows are incompatible with adjacent structures whose windows have a vertical orientation.

A simple change in proportions to correct this incongruity is less disruptive.

The more uniform an area is the more closely existing proportions should be followed; conversely design options increase in an area that does not have a clear visual pattern.

10. The overall texture of a buildings's surface can be a significant factor in how well a building contributes to group unity.

A smooth flat building facade becomes a devisive element amid highly textured buildings.



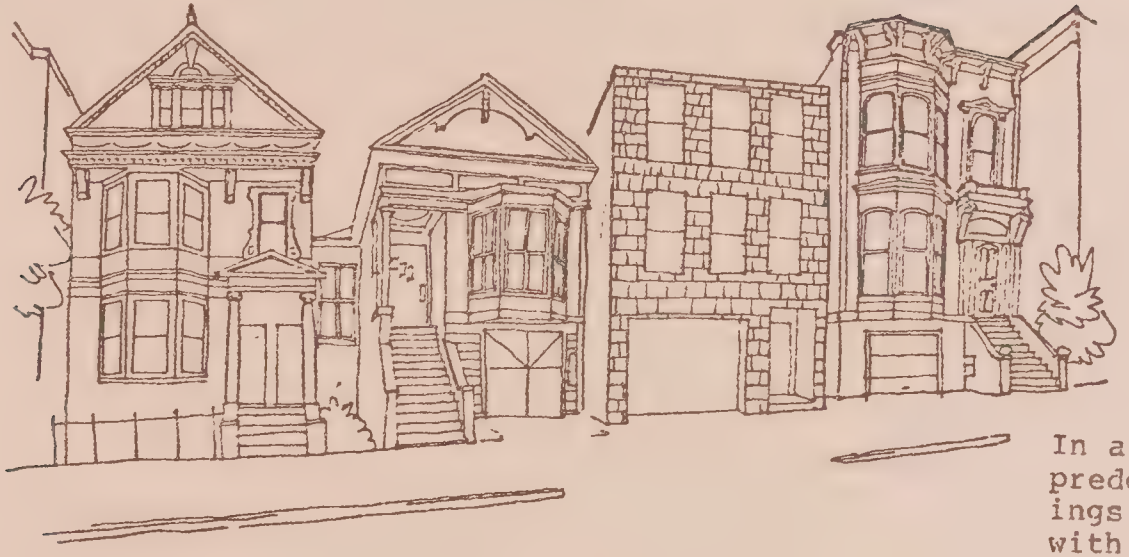
Overall texture is a result of the amount and boldness of decoration and the surfacing material. A strong surface texture can compensate partly for lack of decoration. It should be noted, however, that patterned plywood is less effective than siding built up out of small pieces.

11. Use of similar surface materials assists fitting a new building into a block.

A shingled building will not fit in well with predominately painted stucco buildings.

Plywood usually blends poorly with both stucco and traditional siding.

12. The surface finish affects how well a structure will conform to neighborhood character.



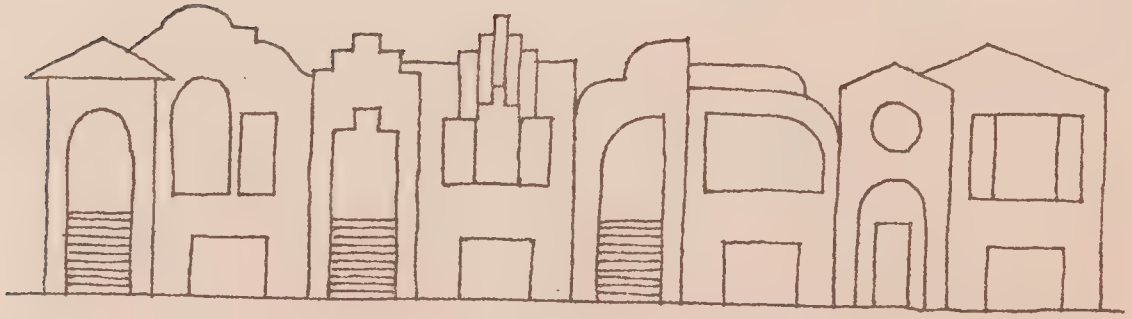
In a neighborhood consisting predominately of painted buildings a visual clash will occur with the introduction of an unpainted structure.

13. Where symmetry or asymmetry has become an important ingredient of a building group the pattern should be adhered to in any new construction within the group.

New building respects existing left-of-center entry pattern.

14. Some neighborhoods are characterized by a consistent use of design imagery evoking previous architectural styles and traditions of buildings. New construction in these areas should support such imagery.

New building is antithetical to the character of area and thus is out of place.



The new building, like its neighbors, evokes a previous architectural tradition supporting group unity.

15. Where a row of substantially intact identical buildings posseses architectural, historical or neighborhood significance, new buildings within this group should emulate the essential features in order to preserve the group's integrity.

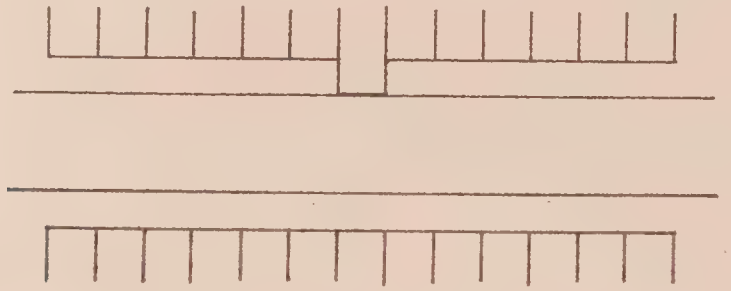
New building here should duplicate essential form.

New building here need not extend row.

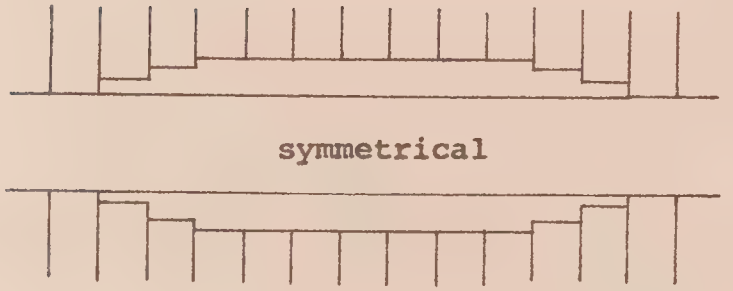
Where buildings composing a row have strong identical architectural features, the new facade should incorporate them.

Where design is restrained variations on the facade are possible without damaging group unity.

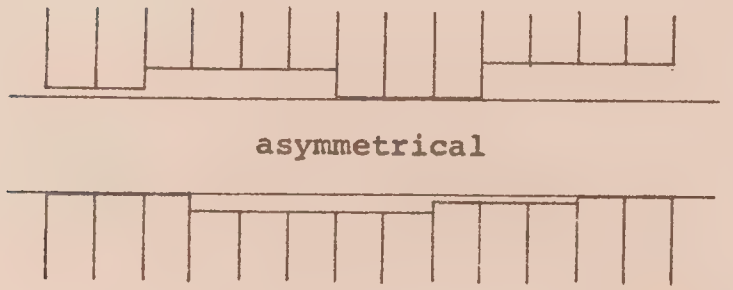
16. When buildings share a common setback a single exception in a wrong place can impair the appearance of the entire group.



Random exception to a setback, without overriding considerations to overall composition will have deleterious effects on the block.



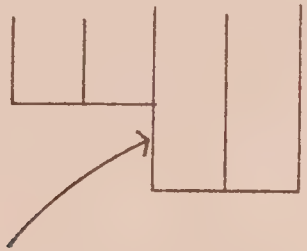
symmetrical



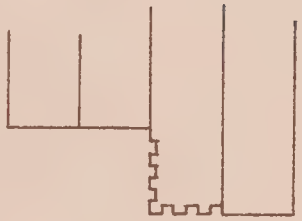
asymmetrical

Exceptions to setback arranged to create interesting spatial compositions can enhance a street.

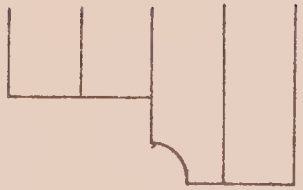
17. Where front setbacks differ, the outermost building at the point of change should be designed to reflect its special role in the streets composition.



Blank wall here can detract.

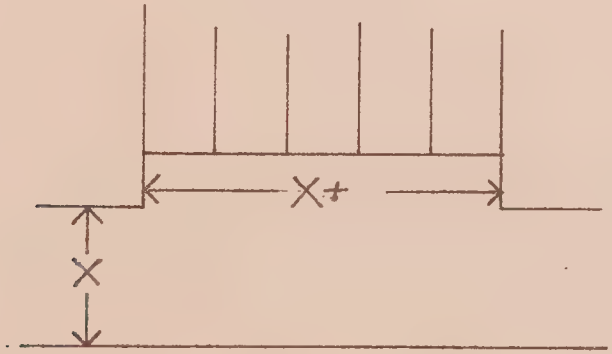


Wrapping front facade treatment around corner is a better response to special location.



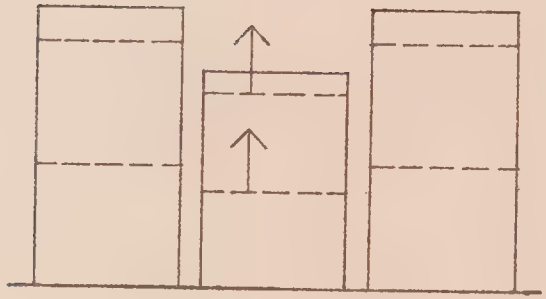
Special design treatment emphasizing corner enhances street.

18. A group of similar buildings differing from surrounding ones can be appropriately set off by a deeper setback.

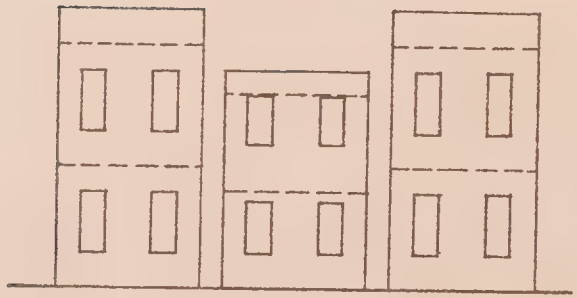


When width of group is less than street width group tends to appear constructed generally setback(s) should not exceed 1/4 width of group.

19. A marked difference in floor to floor heights between existing buildings and proposed new construction can damage sensitive harmony.

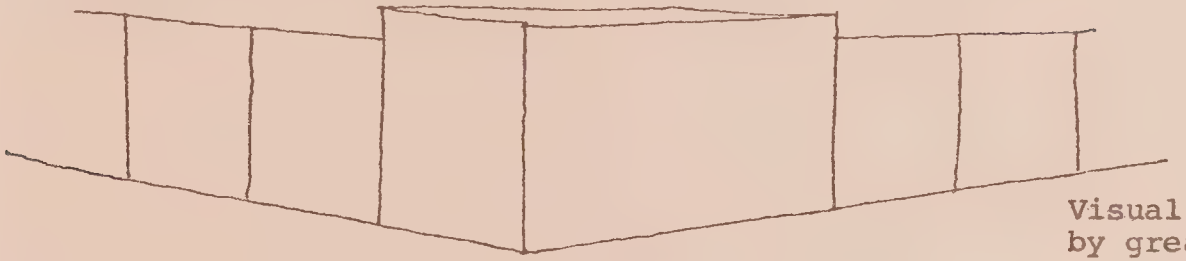


Floor to floor heights should be increased to avoid extreme contrast.

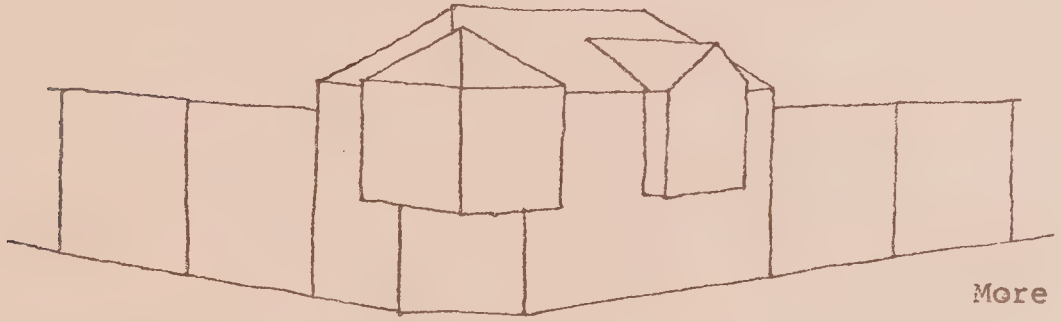


Arranging windows to give the illusion of greater floor to floor height is another way to blend a new building into such areas.

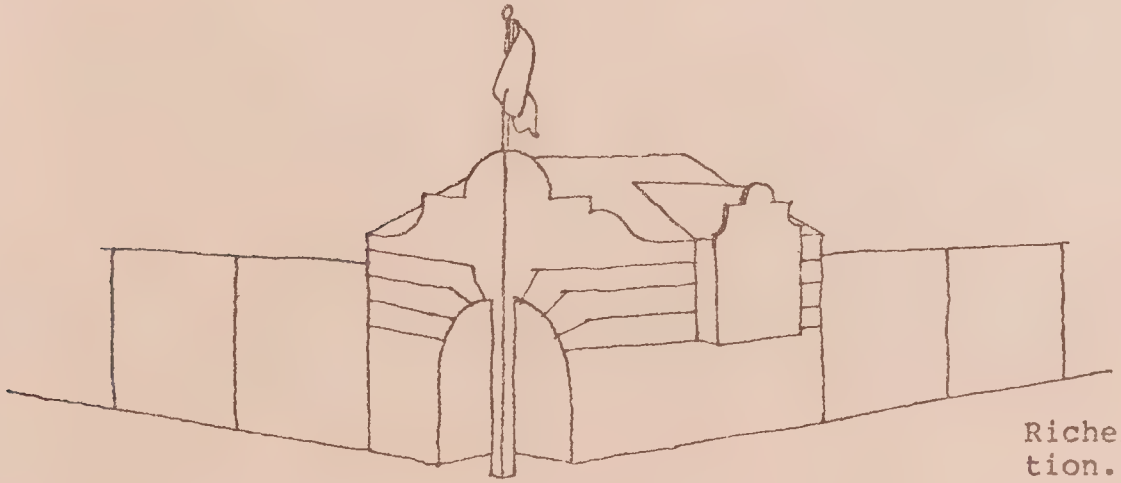
20. Corner buildings play a greater role in forming the character of city streets than other buildings on a block. Appropriately they should be given a visual emphasis and the exposed sides treated with equal importance.



Visual emphasis may be given by greater height.



More complicated form.



Richer or stronger decoration.

21. Where building site is located at a visual focal point created by the street pattern or topography it may appropriately be given greater visual emphasis than surrounding buildings.

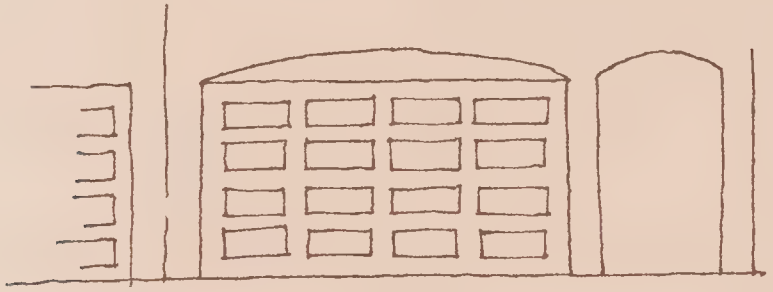
22. Where existing development is bland and listless, a new building should introduce needed visual interest. Even in this circumstance the new building should incorporate harmonizing features such as a use of similar surfacing materials, window proportions and other features designed to create a sense of commonality.

23. Buildings that serve a special civic purpose such as churches and schools may appropriately differ from surrounding structures in scale and in other ways provided there are sufficient harmonizing features to assure compatibility.

Low horizontal building has nothing in common with surrounding structures.

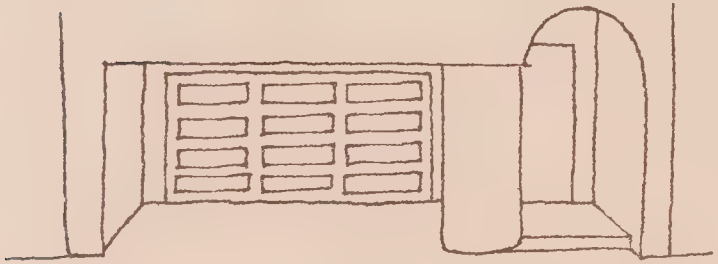
Vertical elements provide some relationship to surrounding buildings.

25. Garage doors frequently detract from the appearance of buildings and lessen the attractiveness of streets.

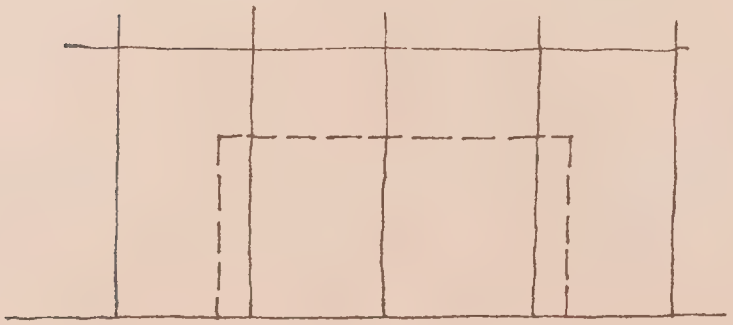


These garage doors present a blank dull expanse.

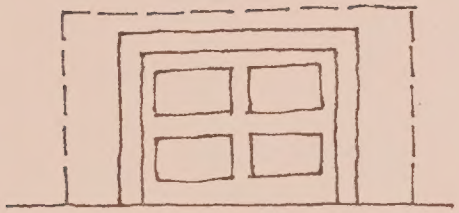
There are many ways garage doors can be made more attractive.



Recessed or arcaded garage doors are less intrusive.

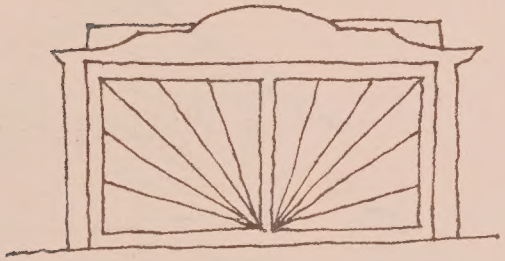


A garage door can be disguised to appear as part of a wall.

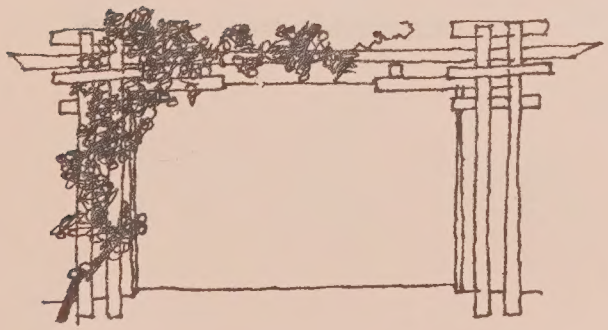


A garage door can be made to look smaller than it actually is.

An easier way to make a garage door look smaller is to use a smaller door.



Garage doors can even be given a certain amount of grandeur and elegance.



An attractive percola can transform an ordinary garage door into an attractive part of the building.

24. The latitude of acceptable design increases as the quality of architecture and design unity diminishes.

A new building should carefully fit in a row like this.

Somewhat greater design latitute is acceptable here.

Considerable design freedom is possible without adverse impact in situation such as this.